

Silk Roads, Water Roads, Sand Roads

Trade has been a feature of world history since the days of the earliest human societies. In the era of Classical Civilizations, 600 BCE to 600 CE, large, well-organized trade routes developed. In the post-classical era, between 600 CE and 1450 CE, trade intensified and trade routes matured.

People trade because:

- What you can grow or produce depends on your environment and society. Other people living in different places can produce different things than you're able to produce in your home region. To get access to their crops or goods, you have to trade.
- If you have a surplus of crops or goods and want to sell them or exchange them for other goods, you have to trade.

Trade intensified in the post-Classical era because:

Travel technology improved.

- In China and Central Asia stirrups first emerged, allowing humans to travel further on horseback or camel-back.
- In China compasses and astrolabes (a navigational tool) first emerged, allowing humans to orient themselves far from home.
- Domestication of pack animals matured, meaning humans were better able to raise donkeys, horses and camels for long overland journeys.
- In the Indian Ocean, traders created stronger sailboats called Dhows which used lateen sails. Dhows were able to travel further and carry larger loads of cargo than earlier ships.

Financing (how we pay for things) improved.

- As empires grew, standardized currency (money that was the same everywhere) expanded, making it easier to buy and sell.
- The Tang dynasty in China is believed to have been the first empire on Earth to make wide use of paper (or silk) money, which made it easier to buy and sell.
- Formal "credit," which means the lending of money, developed. This made it much easier for merchants to buy big loads of cargo on loan, then pay back these loans later when they'd sold the cargo.

Empires boomed.

- Booming empires mean booming trade. If an empire is large and prosperous, it produces more goods for trade. It also has wealthier citizens, which means it represents a strong market where others can sell their goods. Empires also usually keep their regions peaceful, since they have strong militaries that enforce laws and protect travelers.
- When the Han empire and western Rome collapsed, trade in Eurasia suffered. When China reunified under the Tang and Song dynasties, trade improved. When eastern Rome boomed as the Byzantine empire, trade improved.
- When Islam expanded after 600 CE, creating the unified world of Islam, trade thrived.
- When the Mongol horde conquered much of Eurasia after 1200 CE, trade thrived.

Silk Roads

- The Silk Roads were a series of interconnected pathways that merchants traveled, bringing goods from China, India, Central Asia, Rome and North Africa.
- Wudi, a Han emperor, first sent voyages along the silk road around 100 BCE.
- The Silk Road thrived during the golden ages of Rome and the Han dynasty, ~200 BCE – 200 CE, but suffered when Han and Rome collapsed around 200 - 400 CE.
- The Silk Road thrived again when China reunified during the Tang and Song dynasties several hundred years later.
- Large empires in India, China, Persia, and Europe (the Byzantine empire) helped the Silk Road thrive.
- The Silk Roads saw relay trade, where merchants traveled short distances and exchanged goods to other merchants, who took the goods further.
- The Silk Roads saw a small volume of mostly luxury goods exchanged, since overland trade in this time was still difficult, risky and expensive.
- The Silk Roads led to large-scale urbanization in China and Central Asia, with cities like the Chinese capital of Chang'an (or Xian) booming.
- The Silk Roads enabled the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and northern China, since many merchants embraced Buddhism.
- Technology spread along the Silk Road. Chinese technologies like gunpowder, paper and silk spread along the Silk Road all the way to the Middle East and Europe.
- Disease also traveled the Silk Roads. The Bubonic Plague occasionally spread, carried by travelers or rodents that traveled with them, devastating at different times empires in Europe and Asia.

Indian Ocean Trade (Water Roads)

- The Indian Ocean Trade was water-borne trade between India, the east coast of Africa, Southeast Asia and China.
- Boat-based trade in the Indian Ocean dates all the way back to the era of First Civilizations, with trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus River Valley civilization.
- Trade in the Indian Ocean was carried out, not really in large empires but in an “archipelago of towns.” This meant much urbanization along the coasts, as diverse port cities grew and thrived.
- Merchants in the Indian Ocean were diverse, coming from the Roman world, Africa, India, the Middle East and Asia.
- Merchants carried cargo on sailboats called Dhows.
- Dhows could carry more than domesticated pack animals, so the Indian Ocean trade saw both luxury goods AND some larger, less-expensive bulk goods.
- The Indian Ocean trade routes are famous for carrying spices from India, as well as artisan products from China, India and Rome.
- Since Buddhism was friendly to merchants, many merchants became Buddhist in the era 600 BCE – 600 CE.
- After Islam developed around 600 CE, it spread rapidly along trade routes. The bulk of merchants in the Indian Ocean converted to Islam in the period 600 CE – 1450 CE, often adopting the Arabic language.
- Politically, most large empires left the Indian Ocean trade alone. China, during the Ming dynasty, sent a massive expedition to the Indian Ocean. This force could have taken control of trade by force at this point, but China chose not to.
- Wealth from Indian Ocean trade led to the emergence of strong leaders and well-organized empires in Southeast Asia and the east coast of Africa
- Swahili is an example of a trade-fed civilization that merged on the east African coast. These civilizations became predominantly Muslim.
- Srivijaya, with its capital of Palembang, is an example of a trade-fed civilization that emerged in southeast Asia. Srivijaya became predominantly Buddhist.

Trans-Saharan Trade (Sand Roads in West Africa)

- The Sand Roads of West Africa were a series of overland trade routes that connected the diverse geographic regions of West Africa.
- Sand Road trade really began around 300-400 CE, when camel riding traders from the Sahara desert began organizing large camel caravans that crossed the harsh desert region.
- North Africa was fertile agricultural land that had once been controlled by Rome.
- Saharan African was an arid desert-land home to camel-riding pastoral nomads such as the Berbers.
- West Africa, along the Atlantic coast, was also a fertile agricultural land. Several empires emerged here during the post-Classical era, such as Mali and the Songhay. These empires were fed by trade.
- The Sand Roads of West Africa carried luxury goods and also some more bulk goods.
- The Sand Roads are famous for carrying salt, gold and slaves.
- Local political leaders grew powerful by taxing or monopolizing trade on the sand roads. Leaders of West African civilizations at various points established monopolies in gold and slave-trading, allowing no one else to do it. They also taxed the salt trade heavily.
- Islam spread rapidly in West Africa after 600 CE, bringing a unifying Muslim culture and also widespread literacy.
- Trade led to major urbanization in West Africa. Cities like Timbuktu emerged as places of gathering, government centers, and (after 600 CE) centers of Islamic learning.